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ABSTRACT

Predicating that undergraduate students' judgments of teaching ability are based on perceptions of the instructor's linguistic nonstandardness rather than on actual (or manipulated) language patterns, a study examined differences among students' perceptions of non-native English-speaking instructors (NNSI). Photographs of either a Chinese, a Nigerian, or a Dutch student (of similar body type, ethnically typical, and similarly posed) were presented together with a script that explicitly identified the ethnicity of the instructors. A native Dutch speaker produced two versions (moderate accent and high accent) of two texts from published model college lectures. Though they were of approximately similar readability and length, one lecture was more clearly organized and less informationally dense than the other. Dependent measures included judgments of NNSI superiority, interpersonal attractiveness, and dynamism. Results indicated that: (1) though the NNSIs were on the average judged of equivalent physical attractiveness, students' idiosyncratic judgments of instructor attractiveness were the most potent factors in determining such outcomes as teaching skill and lecture quality; (2) students were able to discriminate between different levels of accentedness, and these differences in accent did affect certain judgments of NNSIs; (3) the African NNSI was judged highest in superiority and also in dynamism; and (4) being a person of color did not negatively affect student ratings. Findings suggest that undergraduates' perceptions of NNSIs can be affected by factors extraneous to language variables, and that the study lends credence to a generalized xenophobic reaction to NNSIs (rather than one based primarily on degree of racial difference). (RS)

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Effects of Language and Race on Undergraduates' Perceptions of International Instructors: Further Studies of Language and Attitude in Higher Education

UGA Seminar in Intercultural Communication[1]

Paper presented at the International Communication Association Convention

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synopsis

Although it is difficult to pin point the number of international instructors currently employed in U.S higher education, recent analyses concur in observing that exposure of undergraduate students to international and non-native English speaking instructors (NNSI) is already substantial, and continues to grow. Moreover, the role NNSI instructors play tends to place them in particular jeopardy of

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negative undergraduate perceptions: they disproportionately serve as instructors of math-intensive, introductory, "gate-keeping" courses. A recent series of studies documents the impact of negative undergraduate stereotypes of NNSIs. For example, undergraduate judgments of NNSI teaching ability seem based on *perceptions* of the instructors' linguistic nonstandardness, rather than on actual (or manipulated) language patterns (Rubin & Smith, 1990). In fact some evidence suggests that negative predispositions of NNSIs measurably undermines undergraduates' listening comprehension. Students with more experience in NNSI-taught are less vulnerable to the effects of such stereotypes (Rubin, 1992).

Since undergraduates' stereotypes of NNSIs account for effects of the same order of magnitude as actual language factors, it is of some interest and utility to further explore the etiology of these attitudinal responses. One hypothesis is the mainstream U.S. undergraduates are reacting with a generalized xenophobia; in that case, all NNSIs would be judged negatively. Alternatively, these students may be reacting to the degree of otherness of NNSIs; in that case mainstream U.S. students would respond favorably to a Northern European Caucasian instructor, and less so to an African or Asian instructor. Brown (1988) found an effect of attributed NNSI nationality on undergraduates' perceptions of language competence; curiously, an Italian instructor was judged less capable in English than a Sudanese. No previous studies, however, have directly investigated the instructors' race in conjunction with actual differences in linguistic performance.

METHOD

For the present study, race was manipulated by projecting a photograph of either a Chinese, a Nigerian, or a Dutch student, Each was of similar body type, ethnically typical, and similarly posed. The models proved equivalent in terms of judged physical attractiveness. The photographs were presented in conjunction with a script that explicitly identified the ethnicity of the instructors. Marker variables showed that they were appropriately perceived.

Two texts taken from published model college lectures. Though they were of approximately similar readability and length, one (on the topic of pheremones) was more clearly organized and less informationally dense than the other (about Galaxies).

Accent was manipulated using the matched guise technique. A native Dutch speaker produced two versions of each lecture. In one version (moderate accent) he attempted to simulate American English as closely as possible. In a second version (high accent) he was told to caricature what Americans would judge to be a "foreign accent." Analysis of marker variables indicated that the manipulation was appropriately perceived.

Dependent measures included judgments of NNSI superiority, interpersonal attractiveness, and dynamism as measured by Zahn and Hopper's (1985) Speech Evaluation Instrument. Besides marker scales for perceived NNSI accent and ethnicity, other outcome variables

included judged teaching ability and judged lecture quality. Listening comprehension was measured by a cloze test with every sixth word deleted. As candidates for variables which might mediate students' judgmental processes, perceived physical attractiveness, amount of time spent overseas, and number of classes taken with NNSIs were also measured. Finally, participants filled out a version of Bogardus (1933) Social Scale as an index of ethnocentricity.

RESULTS

ANCOVAs of the marker scales for manipulated accent and ethnicity indicated that in addition to effects of the experimental manipulations, perceived physical attractiveness was a significant covariate effect. Instructors judged to be more physically attractive were judged to speak in a more standard accent and to be more Caucasian.

Listening comprehension was affected only by lecture text. The more clearly organized and less dense lecture was comprehended significantly better.

Perceived physical attractiveness of NNSIs was the sole factor affecting judgments of interpersonal attractiveness and of teaching skill. In both cases, the relationship was positive. Judgments of lecture quality were similarly affected by perceived physical attractiveness. In addition, moderately accented speech resulted in higher ratings of lecture quality than did highly accented speech. The

less dense and more organized text also resulted in a higher rating on this variable.

Judgments of superiority and of dynamism were, like all the other outcomes, positively related to perceived physical attractiveness. In addition, these variables revealed significant effects for race. In both cases, the African NNSI received more positive ratings than the European NNSI. Judgments of superiority were, in addition, affected by NNSI accent; the highly accented speech received lower ratings on this outcome than did the moderately accented speech.

DISCUSSION

As in previous studies, these findings indicate that undergraduates' perceptions of NNSIs can be affected by factors extraneous to language variables. In this study, though the NNSIs were on the average judged of equivalent physical attractiveness, students' idiosyncratic judgments of instructor attractiveness were the most potent factors in determining such outcomes as teaching skill and lecture quality. Unlike some previous research (e.g., Rubin & Smith, 1990), students in this study were able to discriminate between different levels of accentedness, and these differences in accent did affect certain judgments of NNSIs. The previous studies used female NNSIs and corresponding female voices, and we speculate that female NNSIs may be subject to different linguistic stereotypes than their male counterparts.

The present study did find some effects for NNSI race, but in unexpected directions. The African NNSI was judged highest in superiority and also in dynamism. In fact, these results are consistent with Brown's (1988), which found that an instructor identified as Italian was judged less linguistically competent than the same instructor when labelled Sudanese. As has been found in some studies of teachers' evaluation of non-native English speakers' writing (Janopoulis, 1992), raters sometimes "bend over backwards" and make allowances for linguistically diverse individuals who perhaps perform better than had been expected.

The present study examined differences among NNSIs of differing racial background. In this context, being a person of color (Asian or African) did not negatively affect student ratings. Therefore this study lends credence to a generalized xenophobic reaction to NNSIs, rather than one based primarily on degree of racial difference.

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